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AN INTERVIEW

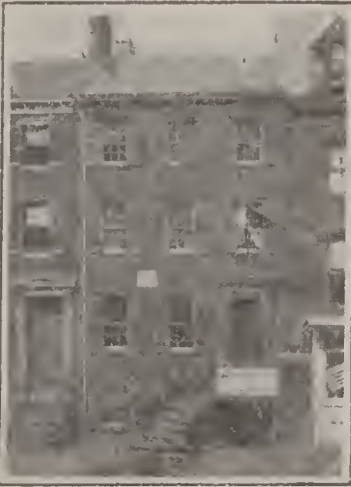
WITH
OSBORN H. OLDROYD



NEW YORK
THE SUN



AN INTERVIEW
WITH
OSBORN H. OLDROYD
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IN THE



HOUSE IN WHICH LINCOLN DIED

NEW YORK
THE SUN

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Lincoln

Gift
Mr. Ritchie.
21 OCT 1908



FORTY-EIGHT YEARS WITH LINCOLN

YET OLDROYD NEVER SAW THE PRESIDENT IN PERSON

His Life Devoted Since the Civil War to Collecting Relics
of Lincoln and Articles Associated With Him—His
Collection Now in the House in Which Lincoln Died.

WASHINGTON, Nov. 9.—For a ready-made romance take the story of OSBORN H. OLDROYD of Washington. It begins with a Saturday night in August, 1860, when Oldroyd was 19 and kept a news stand in Mount Vernon, Ohio.

"I used to get the Eastern papers from Pittsburg," he said to a *Sun* reporter; "and if there was anything new in the paper line the dealer would put in a sample copy and I could return it or pay for it when I settled up with him.

"All the boys in town used to gather in the store waiting for the New York *Ledger* and the *Mercury* so that they could find out what happened next in the continued stories. They'd sit right down on the floor sometimes and start in to read, they were so eager to find how things came out.

"This night that I'm telling you about there was a little paper-covered book in the bundle and one of the boys across the counter reached out and says: 'What's that? Let's see it.'

"I picked it up and looked at it. 'No,' I says. 'I guess I'll keep this and read it myself,' and I put it back on the shelf. It was—wait a minute."

"He took out some keys, unlocked a cabinet and

placed a brown-covered pamphlet in his visitor's hands. It is a rare little book now, but that is not its chief source of interest. It calls for the attention of every American, for it was the nucleus of the collection now installed in the house where Lincoln died.

It is the story of the forming of this collection that constitutes the romance of Mr. Oldroyd's life. In fact it has been the whole end and aim of his life for years.

The little pamphlet began it. The title was "The Life, Speeches and Public Service of Abram Lincoln." It was called the Wigwam edition, because the building where Lincoln was nominated was so called. It sold then at 25 cents a copy, but if you have one to sell now you are likely to get a good many times 25 cents for it.

Young Oldroyd read the book and was so stirred by the achievements of Lincoln that he began to get together other campaign pamphlets and badges. He joined a club of boys, all too young to vote, but by no means too young to wear campaign badges and under the name of the Wide awake, to do a great deal of parading and cheering. The badge he wore at that time is now in the Oldroyd collection.

Then came the war. The youthful admirer of Lincoln enlisted and served until it was over. He carried his mania for collecting with him, but he did not give much thought to the picking up of Lincoln mementos then.

All his efforts were bent on gathering war relics. It was not until the morning of April 15, 1865, that the thing happened which determined his career.

"We were at Murfreesboro then," said Mr. Oldroyd, "and that morning there was a sort of jubilation parade because of the surrender and the prospect of everything being settled. The band was playing 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' and the boys were all laughing and twitting one another as we marched along.

"Oh, that girl you left behind you has married another fellow long before this!" they'd say.

"And so we were going on, full of life and spirits, when an orderly rode up to the officer and gave him a paper. We were halted and faced forward, the band was stopped in the middle of the piece and the officer read the news.

"Lincoln was dead. Without a word, except of command, we reversed arms and marched back, the band playing a dirge. And every fellow's head was down and every man looked as if he was going to his own father's funeral.

"Well, as soon as we disbanded I went up to headquarters. Outside, tacked on a bulletin board, were three despatches. The first said: 'Abraham Lincoln was shot in Ford's Theatre. Mortally wounded.' The second was: 'Abraham Lincoln not expected to live.' And the third: 'Abraham Lincoln died at 22 minutes past 7 this morning.'

"I went in and asked the man in charge if I could have the three bulletins when they were through with them. He said—why, yes, I could. I told him I hoped they wouldn't get torn off or mutilated in any way, that I was afraid they might.

"'Well,' he said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll write some new ones and put them out right now and you can take these.'

"He did it and here are the originals. From that time I saved everything I could get hold of that had anything to do with the life and acts of Lincoln."

It was not until chance—future generations may call it Providence—sent him to Springfield, Ill., that Mr. Oldroyd's passion for gathering Lincoln relics had its full opportunity. When he went there a German was occupying the old Lincoln homestead, renting it from Robert T. Lincoln. Mr. Oldroyd determined to as soon as the chance came to live in the old home of the man he loved and revered.

In 1883 the German moved out and Mr. Old-

royd took the house at \$20 a month. In the meantime he had been accumulating a host of relics.

When the Lincolns went to Washington in 1861 they sold all their household furniture at Springfield. In this way it became scattered, and it was by securing a piece here and a piece there that the collector got together his treasures.

In 1888 Mr. Oldroyd asked Robert T. Lincoln if he would not present the Springfield house to the State. Mr. Lincoln wrote that he did not want to offer it lest it might be construed as a political move, but that if the State asked for it he would present it.

The matter was arranged. The house became the property of the State and Mr. Oldroyd offered his collection on condition that he remain in charge of it at a salary during his lifetime. That was agreed to and for a few years the collection was open to the public in the old home.

"Then Altgeld became Governor," said Mr. Oldroyd quietly, "and gave me two weeks to get out."

It was a hard blow. Years of time and all the money he could spare had been put into the work of forming a collection which he believed would become one of the most interesting and valuable legacies this generation could leave to the country. Yet nobody seemed willing to help him carry the burden of its maintenance.

He was yielding to the thought of selling it when a telegram came from the Lincoln Memorial Association at Washington. It was followed by letters full of enthusiastic predictions of what would happen if Mr. Oldroyd would bring the great collection to Washington and place it on exhibition in the house where Lincoln died. Why, according to the sanguine ideas of those who wrote to Mr. Oldroyd, the negroes alone would rush in such numbers to view the relics of the Emancipator that a gold mine would seem poor in comparison.

So the collection came to its present home. The rent was \$100 a month and the memorial association paid it for a year.

The negroes showed an unexpected indifference and the thousands of men and women who visit Washington were slow to find out the high red house in Tenth street. There were three months in 1894 when the receipts were \$8, \$12.50 and \$17—with rent, however, remaining stationary at \$100 all the time.

It was hard pulling, indeed, but in 1897 the Government bought the house and the collection is kept there free of rent. There are plenty of persons who say that the Government ought to buy the collection too, and some of them are working toward that end. If they succeed in persuading Congress to buy it they should see that the collector himself goes with the rest. All the inanimate things which crowd the rooms seem to speak of Lincoln, but none of these is so impressive, when one stops to think of it, as the man who has devoted nearly fifty years of his life to perpetuating the memory of his hero.

“Do you never get tired of it?” asked the reporter after listening to one visitor after another ask the same questions, calling for the repetition of the same stories and explanations.

“Tired?” was the quiet reply. “Does a man get tired of his profession if it is a profession he loves; preaching, or medicine, or law? This is my profession.

“I would have been a collector, anyway. It is as natural to me as breathing. But when you add to that instinct the interest of doing something that is of lasting value to the country——” he shook his head—“no, I don’t get tired of it.”

“Tell me how you happened to get some of these relics—the cradle in which the Lincoln children were rocked.”

“Well, before Lincoln went to Washington he sent this cradle down to a store in Springfield, kept by a man named John Williams. There were a good many clerks in the store, but none

of them was married. Lincoln said to the proprietor:

"Friend Williams, here's a cradle that we're through with and I want you to put it up in your storeroom and give it to the first one of your clerks that gets married and has a baby to rock in it."

"So Mr. Williams took it and gave it to a clerk, who, by the way, married a friend of my wife who was a Springfield girl herself. They moved out West and before they started the cradle was sold at auction along with some other things.

A man named Whitecraft heard a stranger in town say that he was going to get that cradle. Whitecraft didn't really want it, but he was bound the stranger shouldn't get it, so he bid it in.

"Then he put it down cellar or in some damp place and when I moved into the Lincoln homestead and he found I was making such a good collection, he sent it to me. The legs were rotted from the dampness, but I had it all fixed up and there it is."

If he had added "as large as life," he would have spoken to the point, for it is positively the largest cradle to be seen. It is like a small bed on rockers.

Close to it is an old fashioned office chair with signs of long and hard usage written all over it.

"Yes, that was Lincoln's chair in his law office at Springfield," was the response to a question. "I got it from William H. Herndon, Lincoln's old law partner. He had been using it himself for years after Lincoln's death until one day when I was in his office I said to him:

"I believe you could find a chair that would be more comfortable for you and more ornamental to your office."

"I don't know but you're right," he said.

"Well, then," said I, "go down stairs and pick out any chair you like in the furniture store and I'll pay for it."

"He did so and I carried off this with his signed statements as to its genuineness.

"That haircloth sofa and the haircloth rocking chair next to it were sold when Lincoln went to Washington. Some sisters by the name of Rockwell who were dressmakers bought several things at the Lincoln sale, but I got them back when they left town some years later."

"How did you get Booth's spur?"

"Well, I tramped out over the road by which he escaped and I interviewed everybody along the route. There were very few who had been living there at the time of the assassination.

"One of these was Mrs. Mudd, wife of Dr. Mudd, to whose house Booth went and where he stayed while the doctor treated his injuries. I got the spur from a neighboring farmer.

"Here are some of the most interesting things in the collection," showing a good-sized candle, discolored by age, and beside it a black-handled table knife with some hardened substance adhering to the blade. "The room here, where Lincoln breathed his last, was rented at that time by a young man named Clark.

"After the President's body was removed Clark found this candle, with which the surgeons had heated the plaster, and this knife, with which they had applied it. That is some of the plaster that is still clinging to the blade.

"Clark kept them as relics and sent them to his sweetheart up at Boston. After his death his wife—his former sweetheart—let me have them.

"Clark also had a small lock of Lincoln's hair; not very much, but genuine. It was a little of that which was cut by the surgeons that night. Mrs. Clark always said I should have it after her death; but when that happened it came into the possession of a sister out West. She says I shall have it in time, but the time hasn't come yet.

"There is one lock in the Army Medical Museum, one in the possession, I suppose, of John Hay's heirs and another is owned by a son of Dr. Taft, who was one of the surgeons. Dr. Taft

promised that it should come to this collection after his death, but his son wants \$1,000 for it.

“Those are the only genuine locks I know of, though I have been offered a good many that claimed to be genuine. One woman sent me, on approval, a lock of rather light brown hair of fine, soft texture. She assured me that it was genuine, having been cut from the President’s head by ‘Dr. Bliss, the physician in attendance.’ Of course it was evident that she had confused Garfield with Lincoln and was probably sincere in her offer.

“But you have no idea how every man, woman or child who ever had the merest glimpse of Lincoln has magnified that connection with him. Some of them have made out very interesting stories indeed, and have told them so often that they have really come to believe in them.

“I lived in Springfield so long that now when I read some of the later biographies of Lincoln I have to smile as I recognize the stories that I saw in the making, as it were. But I can tell you one thing. No one who goes through the country where Lincoln passed his early life will pick up any stories that need suppressing.

“I used to scour the whole neighborhood when I lived in Springfield, searching for relics and information. In order to get at the people in a sort of informal way I’d take my gun along and do a little hunting as an excuse for being out.

“Then I’d drop in and stay all night at a farm house, and it didn’t need much effort among any of the old timers to start the conversation going about Lincoln. And I want to tell you this: I never heard a word against him. I never heard of an action that was not clean and honorable and kindly. Every man revered his memory and every woman loved it.

“And here’s another thing that’s remarkable. You notice that things here are not guarded with any excessive precautions. People are free to go through the rooms alone.

“The other day some one asked me if I had

lost anything at the hands of souvenir hunters; if they had taken pieces of haircloth from the furniture or cut splinters from the chair or the desk. I've been here fourteen years and I have never lost so much as a sliver of wood or a shred of paper that was of value because of its association with Lincoln.

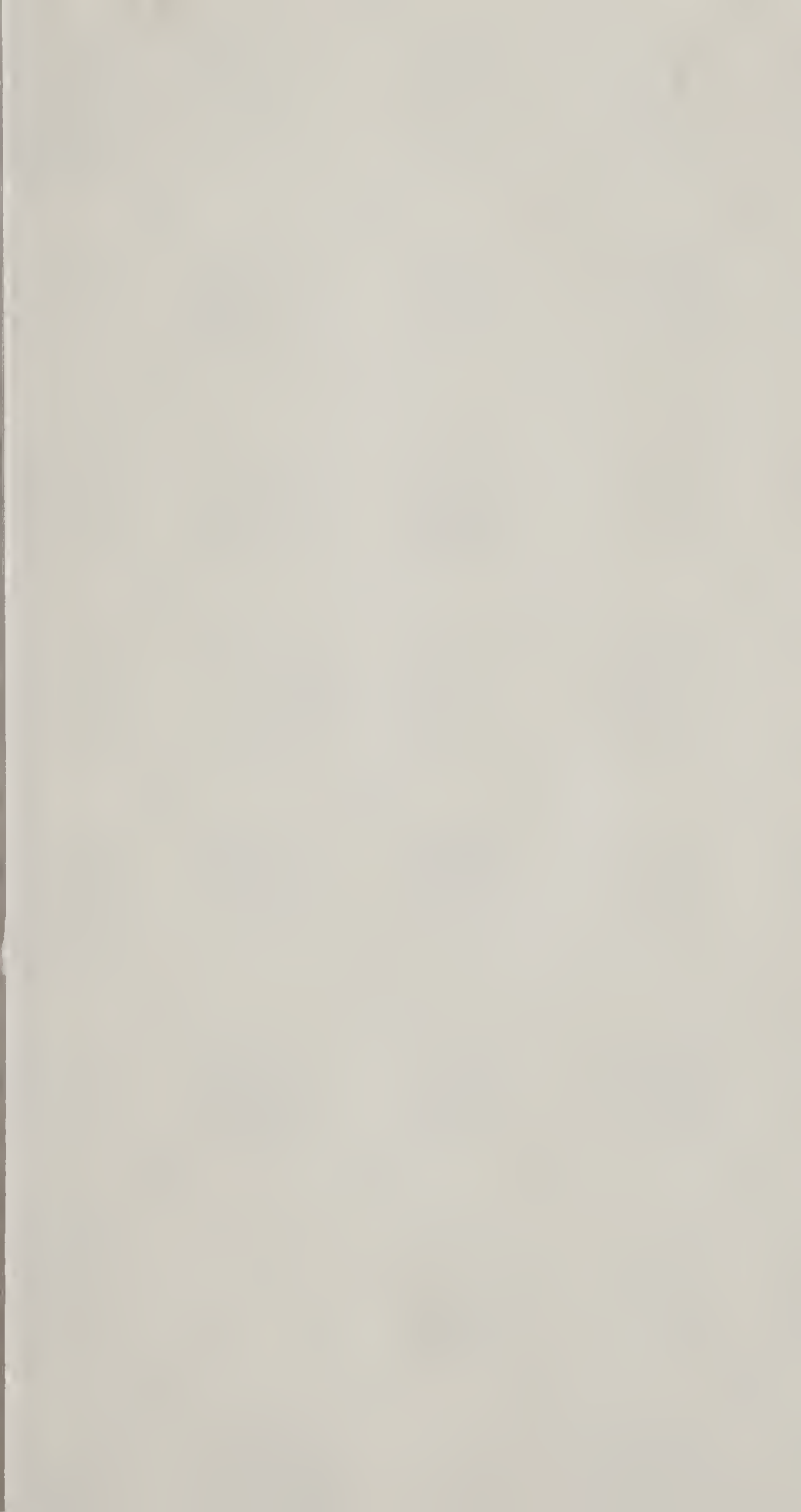
"A man came to me one time after he had gone through the museum and said: 'I'm a collector in various ways myself and I admit that to a man with the collector's instinct it isn't always easy to see the difference between mine and thine. I admit, too, that I thought pretty covetously about a great many things I've seen here; and I realized that it would have been a comparatively easy matter for me to—to annex them. But I vow I couldn't. I had an indefinable feeling that a man had to be honest when Honest Abe's belongings were all around.'"

All of these things are told quietly and simply. They are not rattled off parrotwise to every one who will listen. But every question is answered with a directness, and to an interested listener with a feeling which shows how the thought of Lincoln, for he never saw the man himself, has become the most vital thing in life to this man, his monument builder.

No wonder! More than forty years he has lived with that thought; has read, talked, listened, dreamed of Lincoln; has spent his time and his money hunting, as it were, for Lincoln. His past seems to begin with Lincoln; his present to be filled with Lincoln; and on what he has done for Lincoln he builds his hope of future recognition.

"If some one had done for Washington," he says, "what I have done for Lincoln, wouldn't we be glad now?"

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